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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE CONGRESS VIOLENTLY  
BLOCKED

REF: A. TUNIS 501

[1](#)B. 05 TUNIS 2034

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Tunisian security forces violently blocked a national congress of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) on May 27. On the eve of the Congress, post and other western diplomatic missions received telephone calls from the MFA and Note Verbales recommending that for safety concerns diplomats avoid the Congress and its vicinity. Poloff, along with European diplomats, witnessed security agents who had turned out in force to block access to the LTDH headquarters beat several people who appeared to be trying to attend. The GOT appears determined to prevent the current leadership from conducting a Congress and, along with GOT-loyal League members, continues to attempt to limit the independence of the LTDH. End Summary.

#### Background

[1](#)2. (C) The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, Ref A) has been locked in a five year internal struggle against League members loyal to the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party over the legality of administrative actions taken by the current leadership, led by President Mokhtar Trifi. After multiple delays and cancellations of the LTDH's annual congress, which has not been held since 2000, Trifi and the Executive Committee of the LTDH decided to hold a Congress on May 27. In the proceeding weeks, pro-RCD regional heads of LTDH sections, who had previously filed lawsuits to prevent the Congress, sent letters to Tunisian newspapers denigrating the current leadership. They allege that Trifi has selectively removed certain regional sections because of their refusal to accept his leadership or the results of the 2000 Congress that elected him. Trifi and his sympathizers argue that the plaintiffs in the court case are working in concert with the GOT to undermine the independence of the LTDH. In the week before the proposed congress, seven LTDH members of the pro-RCD camp petitioned and won a case asking the Ministry of Justice to authorize GOT security forces to prevent the Congress.

[1](#)3. (C) On May 26, the MFA called Ambassador to state that Tunisian security forces had been authorized to prevent the Congress and recommended that for safety concerns, U.S. diplomats avoid the area. A Note Verbale sent shortly

thereafter by the MFA stated:

The Executive Committee of the Tunisian League for Human Rights announced that the LTDH Congress will be held on May 27 and 28, 2006. Several LTDH section presidents have petitioned the State Prosecutor to execute a summary verdict that was rendered on September 5, 2005 banning the Congress.

The claimants have obtained, if necessary, the right to legal assistance from the State Prosecutor, to execute the verdict in accordance with legislation and procedures.

We remind you that the disagreement within the LTDH is strictly internal, and that it is not the business of the Tunisian authorities. In our concern for the security of members of diplomatic missions and foreign nationals in Tunisia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs advises the Embassy of the United States of America to invite its personnel and nationals to avoid the areas where the Congress is scheduled to take place and the surrounding areas.

¶4. (C) Post consulted with representatives of the British, French and Canadian Embassies who had received similar phone calls and Note Verbales from the MFA. (NOTE: When attending or observing human rights events such as press conferences and political trials, post often coordinates with European counterparts. While the French and Canadians were not planning and not able to attend (respectively) the event, the British were planning to attend despite the MFA warning.)

¶5. (C) On May 27, Poloff, accompanied by U.K. DCM, attempted to go to LTDH headquarters in downtown Tunis, the site of the Congress. Upon arrival at the street leading to the LTDH building, a half hour before the Congress was to begin at

16:00, there was a heavy police presence, approximately 20 officers in uniform, and at least one hundred individuals who appeared to be civilian clothed police. The police instructed the driver of the U.K diplomatic vehicle in which Poloff was riding that he was not permitted to drive to the League headquarters. Poloff and U.K. DCM exited the vehicle and spoke with security officials, GOT-loyal LTDH members, and one man who presented himself as "charged with carrying out the decision of the judiciary to prevent the Congress" (NFI). All interlocutors said that there had been a court decision not to allow anyone to enter the LTDH HQ, including invitees, LTDH officials or members, and that diplomats could also not pass barricades set up to block entrance to the street in front of LTDH HQ. According to one security official, only members of the Executive Committee were permitted to enter the LTDH HQ.

¶6. (C) Two diplomats from the European Commission and one diplomat from the Belgian Embassy arrived at the scene shortly before 16:00. Over the next half hour, several people attempted to enter the area immediately before the barricades across the road leading to the LTDH HQ. The number of police, the large majority of whom were large men in civilian clothing, had grown to approximately 200 in the immediate vicinity of the barricades. Souheir Belhassen, Vice-President of the LTDH and a member of the Executive Committee, who had been permitted to enter, walked from the HQ to the area of the barricades with several other members of the Executive Committee. She met the diplomats as well as EU Parliamentarian Helen Flautre, who had arrived moments earlier. (NOTE: Flautre sits on the EU Parliament sub-committee of human rights, and on its Tunisia group and frequently travels to Tunisia to defend human rights activists END NOTE.) Belhassen began arguing with security who pushed her several times back towards the direction of the HQ. After she was pushed, a man with her came to her defense who was then also pushed and struck by security officers. Following this incident, LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi arrived by vehicle. Many vehicles that were passing by the road, including apparently Tunisian citizens not involved with the events, were hit aggressively on the hood, windows and roof by security officials with their hands in an attempt

to clear them quickly from the scene. An AP stringer also tried to remain on the scene but was pushed away by police.

¶17. (C) With the arrival of Trifi, who was accompanied by a French senator and two French judges (NFI), the atmosphere at the barricade became more chaotic. Several people, assumedly trying to gain access to the site, were grabbed by security officials who then pushed them down the street away from the site. Poloff witnessed three of these incidents, wherein while aggressively pushing people away from the site, security officials violently struck the people in the head, neck and torso with their fists, in plain view of the assembled diplomats. Among the large crowd of security agents, several had video cameras and still cameras, and were photographing diplomats and the members of LTDH who attempted to enter the site.

¶18. (C) Many of the GOT-loyal members of the LTDH who were on the scene loudly debated with the French judges and senator, as well as some of the diplomats present, claiming that what was being witnessed was "respect for the law" and "justice being carried out, just like in your own countries." One Tunisian interlocutor asked a French judge: "Do you not respect the law?" To which the judge responded: "We respect that which is respectable." The person who had previously identified himself as having been designated to carry out the judicial decision to block the Congress, who had initially been calmly speaking with diplomats on the scene, became more agitated as time passed, eventually telling diplomats that they should not be at the scene -- that they belonged "at your Embassies or at the MFA." Eventually, around 16:30, Trifi and Belhassen and other members of the LTDH Executive Board departed from the scene, and shortly thereafter diplomatic observers departed as well.

¶19. (C) While Poloff was still on the scene, Ambassador received a call from MFA Director General for the Americas and Asia, Ghazi Jomaa, who noted that an American diplomat had attempted to go to the Congress despite the Note Verbale recommending against it. EC Political Counselor, while still on the scene, also received a telephone call from the MFA Director for Europe, who delivered a similar message. Both

the Ambassador and the EC PolCounselor informed the MFA that they viewed the Note Verbal as a recommendation, but decided to send observers nonetheless.

¶110. (C) COMMENT: While the GOT and the LTDH endlessly debate legalistic points about the current crisis within the League, it is clear that the GOT is dead set on ensuring that the LTDH under its current leadership not solidify its status by conducting a National Congress. While pro-GOT League members argue that by consolidating various regional LTDH sections and attempting to exclude pro-RCD members, current League leadership have broken internal League statutes, Trifi et alia know well the history of other independent organizations in Tunisia, such as the young lawyer's association, and the Tunisian Judges Association (Ref B), whose independent nature was co-opted when the ranks of these groups were filled with pro-GOT members. With the League, one of whose primary objectives is to monitor and report on human rights abuses by the GOT, having RCD rank and file in the organization would potentially compromise its operational utility, as pro-GOT members would be reluctant to report on GOT violations.

¶111. (C) COMMENT (cont'd): Meanwhile, the GOT continues to insist that rule of law is the fundamental issue at hand and the LTDH crisis remains strictly internal. While human rights activists often allege abuse by security forces, the incidents of violence at the LTDH congress mark the first time in recent years that Embassy officers have witnessed such abuse first hand. The events also mark the first time that the GOT has attempted to warn off foreign observers. The LTDH has been a cause celebre for the EU -- EU funding for the organization has been blocked for years. EU observers were present, and vocal, at the events surrounding the Congress, and although no French diplomat observed the events, the Quai d'Orsay released a mild statement expressing

concern about the LTDH situation. Nevertheless on May 30,  
local GOT-influenced newspapers headlined Ben Ali's  
acceptance of awards from three European organizations,  
including a section of the prestigious Institute of France.  
END COMMENT.  
HUDSON